

Dynamic Setting. The first assignment for Richard Thomas's Contemporary Dark Fiction Class, was to write 400 words of heavy setting, a place I'd been. Here's what I wrote:

Cheese Curls

A pink, heavy-set woman with gray curls wearing black polyester slacks and a print blouse answers the doorbell. She leads me into a cramped kitchen.

The house has a musty, sour smell—dingy attic meets sweaty sneakers. The kitchen counters are covered with cereal boxes and stacks of cans. Newspapers and magazines tower on one side of a small table threatening to list like an unbalanced row boat. More newspapers heap across the worn brown linoleum.

She says her husband is in the back bedroom, her tiny eyes begging my tolerance.

I squeeze along a narrow animal track of dirty orange carpet wending through canyons of stuffed plastic bags and bulging cardboard boxes. Higher mounds of accumulation skulk from the shadowed living room.

More stockpiles mount the walls and curtained windows of the bedroom. My patient is a bloated man sharing the bed with an idle CPM machine and his overfull patient belonging-bag from the hospital. A puckered ridge of surgical glue bisects his fish-belly pale knee.

I whip out a pad and set my heavy homecare bag on top; introduce myself and flash my ID badge. After I take his vitals, I use extra wipes on my stethoscope and BP cuff as if the clutter were contagious. The clean bite of alcohol momentarily slices the room's heavy must.

His knee is predictably warm and swollen. Like most patients, he whines about the pain as I guide him through his PT exercises. I refrain from reminding him the surgeon hacked off the ends of his bones to jam in his new metal and plastic knee, mindful of this couple's entrenched fragility. He tries to win leniency with effusive praise for my expertise during his rest break. I volley back friendly chit chat and start the next round of exercises.

From behind my professional mask, I catalog the layers of the facing wall: sealed candy boxes, tick-plump paper bags, baskets of clothes, a shower chair missing a seat teetering beside a pleated lamp shade. Three skis poke up from the back of the pile.

A clear plastic jumbo-jar, as big as a dog crate, rests on the bottom stratum, filled with fluorescent-orange cheese curls. I can almost taste their tangy crunch.

How many years has that unopened jar squatted on the bedroom floor beneath an ever-climbing bluff of debris—and are the cheese curls still edible?